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ABSTRACT

There is a need for improved communication among different tribes and for American Indian information dissemination through the mass media. For Indians to become involved in developing talent in the area of media technology, it must be assumed that the individual tribal societies and other Indian communities are human entities coequal with the dominant non-Indian society and that the media technology can be put into the service of Indian people in an Indian fashion for an Indian future by Indian communicators themselves. Communications problems for Indian people are two-fold: the first emanates from within the individual tribal societies, and the second arises from the nature of mass communications today. Indian communications should function in an inward direction toward the rebuilding of the tribal community and in an outward direction toward interpretation of the external society. The 2 immediate bases for media development in the immediate future are the preliminary network of communications already in existence and the media training programs in the Federal schools and universities. (PS)

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THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN INDIAN LIFE



On his deathbed, the famed novelist John Steinbeck confided to a close friend that, as a writer, the only individuals remaining in the world whom he envied were black people, because he could perceive the unrealized wealth of their profound yet largely untold experience.

Indian people today enjoy a more diverse, realized and unuttered universe than the American blacks, a universe also largely unexamined and unexplored. Indian America itself is a pluralistic universe of semi-sovereign tribal societies floating like bright leaves on the dark, alien and uncomprehending sea of a larger and intermittently hostile society.

And Indian America in this decade is propelled by a fever of creativity and ferment, a current of aggressive turbulence. In practically every sector of Indian life there is accelerated motion, a soul-burst of activity. Rights and racial conflicts erupt in long-silent areas of Indian country such as North Carolina and Gallup, N.M.; Indian actors enter the New York stage; a cadre of Indian lawyers hastens a broad understanding of the legal dimension of Indian rights in the minds of the Indian majority; the steady encroachment on Indian resource holdings, abetted by the new so-called "energy crisis," emboldens the defense of Indian homelands. A movement toward the total takeover of reservation social institutions is clearly discernible, as is the renewal of tribal religions. This decade is a critical juncture in the shared Indian life, a time in which, according to author-intellectual Vine Deloria Jr., the emotional problems of Indians are no longer overwhelming as a more fathomable future appears on the horizon. The Indian psyche is achieving a new equipoise. This time is a major moment in Indian history.

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1. THE COMMUNICATIONS CRISIS

But will this unexplored and active Indian universe be comprehended--and recalled--to the coming Indian generations? Will it be kept in the memory as a heritage? Or will it be permitted, as have some decades past, to slip unacknowledged and unheralded, beyond recall? That is the communications question.

A supposition of tribal bonds is common awareness. The basis for tribal life is common consent. That network of human relatedness, the sense of a family of families we call a tribe, requires a shared awareness of the common life.

Today many Indian communities lack the appropriate power because of the absence of shared contemporary knowledge upon which communities base decisions. The trails of our communities are all too often the trails of gossip and rumor. Indians too often are the last to know the least. Between community and community there are gulfs within a tribe. Those bonds which tie a people together may loosen in some instances, and in other instances fail altogether.

Tribe-to-tribe as well, those lines of communications sometimes fail. While the federal government homogenizes the diverse Indian universe with beneficent or malevolent decision-making affecting the present and the future, individual tribes, isolated from the fates and fortunes of other tribes, repeat their fatal mistakes without the benefit of the knowledge of their successes. Tactics hard won by one tribe, tactics and knowledge addressed to a secure Indian future, go unheard and unheeded by other tribes for lack of information. There is today a crisis of communications among Indians about and for themselves, a crisis only Indians can resolve. How do we go about finding a solution?

The single fundamental assumption for Indian involvement in developing talent in the area of media technology for Indians is a simple one: that the individual tribal societies and other Indian communities are human entities coequal with the dominant non-Indian society, and that the media technology provided in this century can be put into the service of Indian people in an Indian fashion for an Indian future by professional Indian communicators themselves.

Media training and technology--by which are meant educational experiences in the mastering of the disciplines of journalism and printing, radio broadcasting and technology, video broadcasting and technology--can be of immediate and crucial use in the preservation and strengthening of tribal cultures and rights and issues on the reservations, and for the strengthening of self-identity and self-definition for Indians residing outside those locales. Professionalism in media skills can be employed within reservation societies inside the local schools for the cultural shaping of the child, and within the total larger communities to define the common tribal life in both intra-tribal relations and in relations with an outside and engulfing alien society.

2. PROBLEMS IN INDIAN COMMUNICATIONS

Communications problems for Indian people at this point in time are two-fold, the first emanating from within the individual tribal societies, and the second arising from the nature of mass communications today and the controlling perspective or mentality it exhibits toward the American Indian minority community.

A. Failure in Indian communications

The first component of a crisis in Indian communications is the dilution, and in some instances the collapse, of the historic modes of Indian communication within the tribes, bands and clans themselves. In the tribal past, the classic modes of Indian communication have been person-to-person, group-to-group, through story-telling and dance and prayer and the symbolic communication of ceremony, in the setting of families. That classic mode of communication was the primary mode of education, the provision to the young of an entire tribal universe in a fashion which is becoming lost.

In more secure times than these, everything the Indian individual needed to know for self-definition and for tribal definition was made available with the luxury and time of years. For some children, winters were for stories. For all, summer was

for dances, and feasts in the early fall. The ceremonies prevailed like a great hub. In the different tribal orders of time, the pace of growth and the pace of understanding were assured.

But in many tribal sectors today those classic lines of Indian communication have suffered from intermittent and contradictory federal policies of suppression of the ceremonies, the enforced separation of parents and children, the continuing loss of the ability on the part of many to converse in their original tribal languages, and the overweening presence of the majority American culture and its alternate system of knowledge.

A tribal culture might usefully be defined as a known universe borne in the mind of the individual. And in the long history of collision with the Manifest Destiny society, that known universe has been under siege for centuries. Much of the knowledge, the definition of Indian life born in the life of one's own grandfather and grandmother is vanishing with time and death. It is timely and mandatory to seek avenues not to replace those traditional modes of communication but rather to restore and enhance them toward a truly Indian future.

B. Failure in the mass media

The second key factor in the dilution of the classic modes of Indian communication is the engulfing of all Indian people by a majority non-Indian society which buffets, ignores and intrudes upon Indian life. The media systems of the non-Indian society and their contents engulf the Indian mind. Much of the tenor of Indian life today is that of a besieged life, a besieged self-understanding.

Indian people, living on reservations in geographic and cultural isolation, are virtually without the benefits of mass communications. Although they have access to all channels of mass communications--daily newspapers, radio and television--the media provide little information of interest or relevance to Indian people. Mass media efforts deal generally with the municipal-county-state-federal governmental structure and have little meaning to a people living under a unique tribal-federal

relationship. Local media, emanating from communities near reservations, not only tend to ignore their Indian constituencies, but more often are hostile to them. The Indian public is the unserved public.

The communications systems in this country consequently are only improperly labelled the "mass media." With more accuracy they must be styled the "majority media," because they serve the information and entertainment needs of a predominantly Anglo Saxon public rather than those same needs of the myriad minorities within the society, including the Indian nations. The concerns, issues, problems and crises within each minority, including the Indian population, become "news events" only when they reach a point of conflict with the majority interests. And when the media focus on Indian life, it is a distorted and grossly simplified rendition of the "Indian problem" which somehow never changes and which will not go away. Because the media are the prime moulders of public opinion within the larger society, their failures can take on sometimes tragic proportions when they fail to seek the total truth. Indians have been subject to stereotyping in the public mind, through films and television primarily, a stereotyping which is racist and demeaning, but worst of all simply unreal.

The communications media work within the cultural mentality of the dominant American society, with all the assumptions, texture and contradictions which comprise the mentality of any given society. That mentality which subtly governs the "outlook" and "perspective" of the major communications systems in America has, in a literal sense, almost nothing to do with the contents, concerns and configuration of Indian life. Indians are virtually edited out of existence. The mentality which governs the media exhibits the very arrogance and triumphalism of the American culture itself, which recognizes no other coequal manner of living. Whatever fails to measure up to this predefined sense of the proper level of life is unfit for public attention. The media mentality reflects the blind spots, the arrogance and the racism of the society itself.

3. THE ROLE OF THE INDIAN COMMUNICATOR

The function of Indian communications today has a dual direction: a direction inward toward the rebuilding of the tribal community, and an outward direction of interpretation of the external society to the extent that it impinges and weighs upon the tribal society.

Indian communicators, like their non-Indian counterparts working in the press, radio and television, must be busy transcribing the first rough draft of the contemporary history of Indian people, and they must take this moment in Indian history with the utmost seriousness. From within the perspective of Indian concerns, they must have the willingness and the responsibility to hold up a mirror to their times--and to the occasionally troubled and murky matters of tribal times in flux. Indian communicators at this point in history must, as in the past, become the reflective, self-aware and trained eyes and ears of our Indian tribal societies. And they must participate in the strengthening of the tribe and the community through their commitment to handing on, and handing down, the tribal realities of the present and the past.

The responsibilities of the Indian communicator extend outward toward the dominant society as well. Because the Indian tribes today are encircled like islands by the larger containing society, and because of the special trust relationship of most of the tribes with the federal government of the United States, much of contemporary Indian life is radically affected by the stances and shifts in federal Indian policy. Indian people are the most regulated people in history, being subject to 389 treaties, 5,000 statutes, 2,000 regulations, 2,000 federal court decisions, 500 Attorney General Reports and 33 volumes of Indian Affairs manuals.

It is no longer adequate or intelligent, in the area of communications, to ignore the responsibility of Indian communicators for the careful and continuing scrutiny of the makers and executors of federal Indian policy, whether in the nation's capital or throughout the federal structure. The role of trained media professionals in relation to their Indian communities is to measure the performance and conduct of the

federal government, and to bring that information in balanced and objective perspective directly to Indian communities themselves. Nor does this media function collide with the function of the Indian politician. In the words of Walter Cronkite, "We cannot tell you what to do, but we can tell you what's happening."

Responsibilities incumbent on the Indian communicator are to be that of a student of tribal and collective Indian history, a chronicler of contemporary Indian times, a responsible investigator of fact relevant to Indian interests and needs, and a diagnostician and prognosticator concerned about the shape of the future from the portents of things present. The scope of interest of the Indian communicator is the scope of the contemporary Indian universe itself and all that impinges upon it. That world is his to comprehend, to record and to convey through the printed word and the media of sound and sight for the Indian publics.

The fundamental conviction underlying Indian communications is that only an informed people has its future in its own hands. At this point in our common history moreover, American Indian life is the last unexamined sector of this society. And the Indian publics, deprived of crucial information affecting their present and their future, have no realistic and responsible basis upon which to form opinions which are the fundamental force in the moving of governments, whether those governments be tribal, state or federal. To be uninformed is to be politically and socially impotent.

The birth of Indian communications is the birth of an enterprise to meet the unmet information needs of Indian communities. Indians have been the least informed on affairs which affect them of any minority in America. They are bereft of these primary matters of information from which spring social and political consciousness. Information has been the privilege of the few. And in the context of the contemporary Indian political world, both knowledge and information spell power. Information to the Indian masses, of course, short-circuits the politics of privileged information. But to paraphrase the Supreme Court Justices in their 1971 ruling on the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the media exist not to serve the governors but the governed.

The development of truly Indian media systems can benefit the Indian citizenry directly and responsively in a time of widespread, known and critical need.

4. EXISTING INDIAN COMMUNICATIONS

Indian people today already have the basis of Indian "minority media." Today over 300 Indian newspapers and newsletters are published regularly on the reservations and in off-reservation Indian communities. Nearly 50 radio stations around the nation carry regularly produced Indian-content broadcasts, most of them prepared by Indian personnel. One full-time Indian radio station, Ramah Navajo Radio at Ramah, N.M., devotes its entire broadcasting day to its Navajo listenership. The All Indian Pueblo Council Communications Project, begun in 1972, envisions the eventual operation of a communications center in Albuquerque, N.M., with radio, television and newsprint components as well as a printing plant. The American Indian Press Association News Service provides a continuing flow of news stories on national and regional Indian matters and events to about 100 member Indian publications. About 10 Indian men and women are working as TV technicians and nightly news telecasters on video stations in the West. Indian documentary and art films in the past year have begun to appear, and the Indian Community Film Workshop in Santa Fe, N.M., is completing the training of a number of young Indians in film production. The American Indian Theatre Ensemble is performing contemporary Indian dramas on the reservations.

This base core of Indian communications endeavors has emerged from the commitment and experimentation of largely untrained Indian individuals anxious to keep their efforts moving while encouraging others to enter Indian media to acquire professional training which will give them equivalent status and professional standing with their non-Indian peers. Newspapers have collapsed with the departure of an editor when no successor can be found. Indian radio shows with large listenerships have gone silent with the transfer of an individual to another locale. Political dismissals of some Indian reservation editors are tolerated on the grounds they are "not properly trained."

As a result, the lack of educational credentials leaves the field of Indian communications tentative and fragile, and those to whom the Indian media are responsible, the Indian publics, precarious. The realistic alternative to this state of flux and perishability is professional training, beginning in the classroom.

5. INDIAN COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS

A two-fold task, then, lies before concerned Indians today: first, for the sake of the continuity of Indian cultures, to preserve, enhance and develop the classic modes of Indian communications with the assistance of new media skills; second, to develop professional media skills among Indians for use both within the Indian societies of the many tribes and communities within this nation, and externally through the injection of Indian perspectives into the mentality of the "majority media" through the development of a cadre of trained Indian media professionals.

To undertake this task is to master the best of a technology and a methodology alien to Indian people, with the purpose of revitalizing and strengthening the familiar, known world of tribal identity, culture and concerns in a manner matched to the potential of this century and matched to the Indian future.

Indian media development is not a luxury. Unless Indian people acquire the skills to mirror their own lives, history and culture, and their own experiences in the schools through media tools, they will continue to be subject to distorted images and half-truths concerning themselves prepared far outside their own world-view for them. Indian media development does not overlap the services of the majority media. The information and entertainment needs of the larger American public overlook the common public Indian life. Serious Indian issues seldom find themselves on the national agenda. The racist stereotypes of Indians as lazy, drunken, savage and wild continue to be imbedded in the public psyche through the media and the film industries.

Unless Indian people accept the responsibility for clearing the spiritual air of those stereotypes and half-truths, they cannot justly complain of media distortions and lack of news coverage of their profound common concerns. Nor can they complain

justly of the continuing lack of adequate curriculum and educational tools in teaching the Indian young about the Indian experience in an Indian way. Unless a corps of Indian media professionals is developed, communications among Indians themselves will continue to rest in the hands of non-Indians, both in the schools and in the communities, both locally and within the national Indian community.

Media development in the immediate future has two immediate bases from which to work: the preliminary network of communications already in existence among Indians today, both traditional and technological, and secondly the media training programs in the federal schools and universities.

Bureau of Indian Affairs schools to some extent today have closed-circuit TV systems installed in their high school facilities. The Labor Department Manpower Training Program, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the Interior Department have provided subsidy monies for pilot media projects. The private economic sector is beginning to become responsive to media development. The media job market exists today on reservations, and it is one little noticed. And in the universities, the Indian Studies Programs, coupled with media studies, provide concurrently both craft and content for the development of Indian media. Options for media scholarships and training are gradually becoming known to younger Indians. But amid all this, the prior need is for the definition of communications needs among Indians and a reasoned response to those needs.

Indian educators must recognize communications as a legitimate Indian community need which requires backing by professionally trained Indians, and this training must come through the colleges and universities. Directly related to this is the need for a broadly based scholarship program in communications for Indians. The implications for American Indian education and American Indian life are potentially vast.

In the area of education, professional Indian communicators can be used extensively in the field of curriculum tools where their knowledge of the various media and their uses can considerably assist and augment the work of educators in communicating with their audiences, be they children or college students or Indian parents, tribal leaders,

and other groups involved with Indian education. Media tools, with the immediacy and images of the tribal language, the tribal face, the tribal gesture and accent, have a relevance and a potency yet unexplored.

Within the tribal societies and communities themselves, the cardinal benefit will be the forging of information links among the people themselves, a better informed people who are more enabled to make intelligent determinations regarding their present and their future. The proliferation of a responsible mirror image of the contemporary Indian universe, known and available to all: that is the forthcoming task.

Richard V. La Course
April 1, 1973